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The Duchess of Malfi as a Tragedy of Identity

by Elizabeth Oakes

IN the criticism on *The Duchess of Malfi*, there is one major point of debate: how is one to react to and judge the Duchess' behavior as a widow? In exploring this question, scholars disagree: some argue that she causes, even deserves, her degradation and death; others maintain that she transgresses none of the rules of decorum for a widow of the time. Although I will argue for the latter, my sole purpose in this paper is not to examine the Duchess as if she were on trial and I a member of a jury. As I will argue, the Duchess is so easily within the bounds of her society in remarrying that her widowhood is not the cause but the context for her martyrdom. As well as limning her as a character, contemporary attitudes toward widows also provide the configuration within which Ferdinand's vision of her as the Duke's widow, not Antonio's, finally stands. The importance of Webster's depiction of the Duchess' widowhood lies not only in his exonerating her but also in his using the dynamics of her marital status to construct and then deconstruct a female hero within the genre of tragedy.

It has been hard to view the Duchess as a hero,¹ for the male hero in early modern tragedy achieves a kind of identity—"This is I, Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.250–51), says the quintessential hero. "I am a very fool-

¹ That the Duchess cannot be a hero in the traditional sense "should not be attributed to faulty plot construction on the part of Webster . . . but to the fact that the presence of the female protagonist radically destabilizes the tragic paradigm as it has been constructed in criticism from fatal flaw to catastrophe, and, finally, to apotheosis," says Dymphna Callaghan. But, she continues, "there is no need for a female hero nor should feminists try to create a new critical paradigm in order to accommodate one. Heroes are merely the chief characters of plays, not the timeless representatives of the bravest and the best." See her *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of "King Lear," "Othello," "The Duchess of Malfi," and "The White Devil"* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1989), 67–68. However, Frank Whigham calls the Duchess "the first fully tragic woman in Renaissance drama" in "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *PMLA* 100 (1985): 174.

ish, fond old man" (4.7.60),² says Lear, accurately describing himself perhaps for the first time. In tragedy the hero may refer to his place in the society, as Hamlet does, or to his own experience, as Lear does. Identity of both kinds can also be lost: Macbeth's kingly robes hang loosely about him; he is left at the end only with his brute, physical strength, what he had before he accrued society's rewards. Marlowe's Dr. Faustus is literally torn apart, losing not only the constructed self but the body upon which it is predicated. In this play the Duchess comports herself in a way that is congruent with her society's mores, but not with her brother's wishes, and in the end he wins. His victory is not only in his control over her physical self, however. In contrast to her defining herself as woman, wife, and mother—powerless roles outside the personal, domestic circle—throughout the bulk of the play, she at the end reverts to the identity gained through her earlier marriage, one that gave her the one thing her marriage to Antonio did not—status in the society. She and Ferdinand struggle throughout the play over whether she will be the late Duke's Duchess or a living man's wife. At the end she is, she says, the Duchess of Malfi, and with that title she negates her relationship with Antonio: she becomes the woman carved in stone that Ferdinand wanted her to be.

I

Even in the heyday of New Criticism, *The Duchess of Malfi* occasioned historical analysis. In 1951, for instance, Clifford Leech pronounced the Duchess a "warning to the rash and wanton" of the dangers inherent in taking a second husband. In a rebuttal five years later, Frank W. Wadsworth concluded, after examining a wider array of contemporary works on remarriage (Leech cites only three sources opposing remarriage), that "Webster's attitude toward his protagonist was diametrically opposed to what Dr. Leech assumes it to have been." Indeed, he continues, *The Duchess of Malfi* is "essentially the heroine's play." Two more recent critics concur with Wadsworth's judgment. There were two opposing bodies of opinion on widows, Margaret Mikesell argues, and the play shows Ferdinand's attitude toward his sister's union as arising out of but perverting the Catholic Church's espousal of perpetual widowhood and the Duchess' as exemplifying the emerg-

² The lines from *Hamlet* are from the Arden volume edited by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1984); those from *King Lear* are also from the Arden edited by Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1985).

ing, more tolerant Protestant position approving, even encouraging, a woman's remarriage. In his massive study of Webster, Charles Forker also discounts the view that the Duchess is culpable of some breach, recounting contemporary widows who wed, some even to a groom of lesser status, without scandal.³

Wadsworth, Mikesell, and Forker argue convincingly from a solid and varied base of evidence suggesting pluralistic contemporary attitudes toward widows. I agree with them that forces in the culture sanctioned remarriage for a widow; what I wish to add is a closer look at the nuances with which Webster crafts the character of the Duchess. In addition to the arguments of my predecessors, I believe her youth, the propriety of her choice of Antonio, and her freedom to choose further absolve her (actually even within the strictures of the Catholic literature that Mikesell offers).

One aspect of the Duchess that commentators have left undiscussed is Webster's emphasis on her youth. In the literature on widows of the time, even the most conservative moralist and the most vitriolic misogynist exempt the young woman. For instance, in a volume lauding the bereaved wife who devotes herself only to God, the Jesuit Father Fulvius Androtius encourages the younger woman to rewed: such an act, he says, "is not ill but approved of all."⁴ Accordingly, between 1600

³ See, respectively, Clifford Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study* (London: Hogarth Press, 1951), 108; Frank W. Wadsworth, "Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* in the Light of Some Contemporary Ideas on Marriage and Remarriage," *PQ* 35 (1956): 407; Margaret Mikesell, "Catholic and Protestant Widows in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Renaissance and Reformation* 19 (1983): 271; and Charles R. Forker, *The Skull beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), esp. 297–301. Sara Jane Steen also defends the Duchess' remarriage by showing the plurality of attitudes towards the marriage of Lady Arbella Stuart who, although not a widow, resembled the Duchess in other ways in "The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22 (1991): 76. The argument about the Duchess' culpability is by no means settled, however, as two fairly recent works condemn the Duchess as a violator of the rules for widows. Joyce E. Peterson, for instance, judges her derelict in choosing personal happiness over obedience to the strictures of her widowhood. The Duchess is, in fact, the "curs'd example" of Peterson's title, *Curs'd Example: "The Duchess of Malfi" and Commonwealth Tragedy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978). Although more sympathetic to the Duchess, Dena Goldberg believes "the brothers' misinterpretation and condemnation of the Duchess' desires and her egalitarianism is supported by general opinion." See *Between Worlds: A Study of the Plays of John Webster* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1987), 80.

⁴ Father Fulvius Androtius, *The Widdowes Glasse in The Treasure of Vowed Chastity in Secular Persons. Also the Widdowes Glasse*, trans. I. W. P. (London, 1621), 229. Thomas Becon also thinks it "convenient and meet" for the older widow to meditate upon death but "seemly" for the young woman to rewed in "Of the Office of Widows," in "The Sixth Part of the Catechism: of the Offices of all Degrees," in *Works of Thomas Becon*, vol. 3, ed. Rev.

and 1659 half the widows in their twenties and thirties returned to the altar.⁵ As he instructs Bosola to spy on her, Ferdinand alludes to the probability of her remarriage, given her years, a concession that has gone unnoticed by critics:

Ferd. I give you that
 To live i'th' court, here; and observe the duchess.
 To note all the particulars of her 'haviour;
 What suitors do solicit her for marriage
 And whom she best affects: she's a young widow —
 I would not have her marry again.
 Bos. No, sir?
 Ferd. Do not you ask the reason: but be satisfied,
 I say I would not. (1.1.251–57)⁶

From these lines it is clear that Ferdinand assumes suitors will be calling on his sister, with his “I would not have her marry again,” a markedly disjunctive thought. Because he immediately cautions Bosola not to ask him why, we can assume that it would be the logical thing for Bosola to do, despite his inferior status. Judged against the background of the acceptability of a woman of the Duchess' years to rewed, Ferdinand's strictures lose credibility.⁷ He, not her society, is condemning her to a life of solitude.

Furthermore, Webster emphasizes the Duchess' youth with a foil character, the Old Lady, whose presence puzzles critics.⁸ It is the Old

John Ayre (Cambridge, 1844), 3:365–661. That this bifurcation is long standing can be seen in the most popular conduct book of the age, Juan Luis Vives' *A verie Fruitfull and Pleasant Booke Called the Instruction of a Christian Woman*, trans. Richard Hyrde (London, 1592), Book 3. sig. Dd8–Dd8^v.

⁵ Barbara J. Todd, “The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered,” in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 64.

⁶ Later in the play, the Duchess presents herself to Antonio as a “young widow / That claims you for her husband” (1.1.457–58). See also 3.2.139. All quotations from *The Duchess of Malfi* are from *The Revels Plays* volume edited by John Russell Brown (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) and are subsequently documented parenthetically.

⁷ Her youth also obviates the audience's seeing in her the stereotype of the older widow and the stripling, with which Richard insults Elizabeth in *Richard III* (1.3.100–102). All quotations from this play are from the Arden volume edited by Antony Hammond (London: Methuen, 1985).

⁸ She enters “the play for the sole purpose of being abused by” Bosola, says Mary Beth Rose in *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 160. And, says Peter Stallybrass, “The lady serves no function in the scene except as an emblem of corruption,” in “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 133.

Lady's painted face, a sign of old age, that Bosola stresses,⁹ greeting her with the question, "You come from painting now?" (2.1.21), and continuing to describe each wrinkle and inventory of what he calls her "shop of witchcraft" (2.1.35) through twenty-four lines (2.1.21–44). The Old Lady thus graphically reinforces the Duchess' nubility, appearing as she does immediately after the courtship scene.

In addition, other aspects of widowhood that could besmirch the contemporary audience's assessment of her are absent or allayed in the play. Although remarriage was not uncommon for widows of all ages,¹⁰ a year's wait was customary. As William Heale phrases it, a woman who "remarrieth within her yeere of mourning, is by the law free from infamy, but by the lawe also adjudged unworthie of mattrimonial dignity."¹¹ Although no definite time is reported in the text, the ritual mourning period seems to have passed, because the Duchess has been giving parties. In fact, it is to talk about "these triumphs [festivities] and this large expense" (1.1.365) that she calls in Antonio to inspect his accounts of her estate. Surely a lady of her rank would not have breached custom so, and surely Ferdinand would have commented on it if she had.

The Duchess also observes other strictures on remarriage. Like any woman, a widow would not marry within interdicted degrees of kinship or commit bigamy. In addition, marrying her husband's murderer constituted criminality, one of those "detestable" conditions that could nullify a union.¹² The Duchess is not kin to Antonio, nor does she have

⁹ Incidentally, the Duchess in Webster's source, William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure*, calls attention to her years, adding that she is "not yet painted." The passage in its entirety reads, "To the intent then that such mishap [the loss of honor through an unchaste life] happen not to me, and perceiving myself unable stil thus to live, being yong as I am, and (God be thanked) neither deformed nor yet painted, I had rather be the loving wife of a simple feere, than the Concubine of a king or great Prince" (186). The relevant portion of the source is included as an appendix in Brown's edition of the play. Although almost schizophrenic in his attitude toward the Duchess, Painter here justifies her choice with the traditional rationale for the marriage of the young widow.

¹⁰ After 1600, 37.5% of all widows rewed, according to Todd ("The Remarrying Widow," 60). Social critics have also noted this phenomenon. For example, according to Peter Laslett, widowers and widows had a "marked success" in finding new partners. See *The World We Have Lost Further Explored*, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribner's 1984), 156. Indeed, says Lawrence Stone, "It looks very much as if modern divorce is little more than a functional substitute for death," in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper, 1977), 56.

¹¹ William Heale, *An Apologie for Women* (Oxford, 1609), 50–51.

¹² *The Lawes Resolution of Womens Rights* (London, 1632), 71, 59. This volume was written around the turn of the century. Also see F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life: Morals and the Church Courts Mainly from Essex Archidiaconal Records* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1973), 168–70.

another husband. Neither she nor Antonio bears any responsibility for the Duke's death, in contrast, for example, to Vittoria de Corombona and Brachiano in Webster's *The White Devil*. Not realizing this distinction causes Joyce E. Peterson to assert that the

seizure of her duchy and the Pope's censure of her looseness would assuredly have recalled Mary Queen of Scots' difficulties. . . . Mary's subjects, the Pope, and her Catholic allies all turned from her because of her loss of reputation over Darnley's murder and the Bothwell marriage that followed.¹³

However, it was not so much Mary's remarriage but her choice of a man implicated in her consort's murder and one ruthlessly ambitious for her crown that caused her ruin.¹⁴

Not only is the Duchess within the bounds of decorum, custom, and law in remarrying, but she is also not, as one critic of the play claims, "acting out . . . a taboo" in thinking that her financial independence gives "her real power to determine her own behavior."¹⁵ Quite simply, the widow's economic freedom,¹⁶ which was considerable, empowered her, especially when it came to marriage. For instance, those who speak to widows on the subject of remarriage do not command but advise. In "A Godly Advise Touchynge Mariage," Andrew Kyngesmill assures his sister that he is not trying to "persuade or dissuade" her on the choice of a new husband, for she is her "owne judge" in considering her future.¹⁷ When one woman did not agree with her family on the

¹³ Peterson, *Curs'd Example*, 61–62.

¹⁴ See Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (1969; reprint, New York: Greenwich House, 1983), 306–33.

¹⁵ Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (1983; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 90.

¹⁶ A widow received no less than a third of her husband's assets, whether he specified so or no (*Lawes*, 107). According to social historians, the widow's inheritance rights were the most stable of all. For instance, see B. A. Holderness, "Widows in Pre-Industrial Society: An Essay upon Their Economic Functions," *Land, Kinship, and Life-Cycles*, ed. Richard M. Smith (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 433, and Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300–1840* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 282–83. A considerable personal autonomy followed from this financial independence, as various social historians note. The wealthy widow was, along with the queen, the one woman who "ever belonged to England as an individual," says Laslett (*The World We Have Lost*, 19). Also see Richard T. Vann, "Toward a New Lifestyle: Women in Preindustrial Capitalism," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton, 1977), 195; Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 259–60; and Holderness, "Widows," 427.

¹⁷ Andrew Kyngesmill, "A Godly Advise Touchying Mariage," in *A View of Mans Estate* (London, 1580), sig. 13^v.

choice of a new husband, she reminded them, "What fortune I have, I have had it from my [deceased] hus[band] and a widow is free."¹⁸ The poem carved on Lady Margaret Hastings' monument perhaps says it best: "Her second match she made of her own choice," it ends, "pleasing herself who others pleas'd before."¹⁹ Indeed, an actual woman in the Duchess' position could expect to "marry againe to her owne great liking," as a writer of the time phrases it.²⁰

Webster presents the Duchess as choosing well, diminishing the difference in rank between her and Antonio.²¹ Although indisputably he is not the late Duke's social equal, Antonio is certainly not, as Ferdinand first envisions him,

some strong thigh'd bargeman;
Or one o'th' wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge,
Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.

(2.5.42-45)

In fact, Antonio's counterpart in Painter's tale is termed a "Gentleman" in the title;²² and in Webster's tragedy, before he marries the Duchess, he shows some gentlemanly skill when he wins the ring at jousting. Moreover, morally superior to the brothers, he, in his praise of the

¹⁸ Quoted in Miriam Slater, *Family Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Verneys of Claydon House* (London: Routledge, 1984), 105.

¹⁹ Quoted in Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 622.

²⁰ Lawes, 331. For examples of widows setting their own financial or libidinal terms, see the following: Miranda Chaytor, "Household and Kinship: Ryton in the Late 16th and Early 17th Centuries," *History Workshop Journal* 10 (1980): 42, 346; Marie L. Cioni, *Women and Law in Elizabethan England with Particular Reference to the Court of Chancery* (New York: Garland, 1985), 138, 346; and Ralph Houlbrooke, "The Making of Marriage in Mid-Tudor England: Evidence from the Records of Matrimonial Contract Litigation," *Journal of Family History* 10 (1985): 346. Lady Dorothy Union covered both finances and marital relations in her contract with George Shirley. Not only did she assert her wish "to reserve her own living to herself, and to bestow it without any control," but also she stipulated that "if she chance[d] to find fault with her husband's unsufficiency," she could "choose another bedfellow" (quoted in Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* [Hampshire: Thames and Hudson, 1977], 107).

²¹ That Webster takes pains to do this, even though, as Forker argues, marriage between those of different status was not "inevitably deplored" (*Skull*, 300), suggests that the playwright was extraordinarily careful in the Duchess' characterization. In fact, John Selzer maintains that it "is in her proposal of marriage to Antonio that the Duchess most clearly articulates her understanding that an appreciation of worth, not degree [the controversy about which Selzer sees as the primary conflict of the play], should rule people's actions," in "Merit and Degree in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," *ELR* 11 (1981), 72-73.

²² See Brown, *Duchess*, 176.

French court, introduces a standard into the play from which we can clearly judge the two brothers, those "plum-trees, that grow crooked over standing pools" (1.1.49–50), as Bosola terms them. Indeed, they reject him as a spy on the Duchess, deeming him, according to the Cardinal, "too honest for such business" (1.1.230).

In addition, Antonio resembles the man several writers deem appropriate for a widow. For instance, believing a certain type of man will keep his sister from "of an happie widowe" becoming "an unhappie wife",²³ Kyngesmill urges her to reject the suitor who has neither good character nor sufficient income, as well as the one who values wealth, looks, or rank in society above all. In Euphistic prose, Kyngesmill outlines a potential mate who is not of

greate livyng, but of good life: He hath a livyng, but competent, not aboundyng, not flowyng with full streame: Peradventure no Knight, yet a plaine Gentleman, not verie well borne, but verie well brought up, not worshipfull, but worship worthie, not of greate estimation, but of singular honestie, not so long trained in the Courte, as conversant in the Schoole, his landes are not so greate as his learnyng, his Cheste not so stored with monie, but his head and mynde possessed, and furnished with the Creature of truthe, and the inestimable wealth of wisdom: . . . not so well frended of men, as favoured of God . . . I meane not so well attired in the outward man, as clothed in the inward manne.²⁴

This description is not inconsistent with Bosola's description of Antonio to the Duchess as an

unvalu'd jewel [that]
 You have, in a wanton humour, thrown away,
 To bless the man shall find him: he was an excellent
 Courtier, and most faithful, a soldier that thought it
 As beastly to know his own value too little
 As devilish to acknowledge it too much:
 Both his virtue and form deserv'd a far better fortune.
 His discourse rather delighted to judge itself, than show itself.
 His breast was fill'd with all perfection.
 And yet it seem'd a private whisp'ring-room,
 It made so little noise of't.

(3.2.248–58)²⁵

²³ Kyngesmill, "Godly Advise," sig. 13^v.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Id^v-Ie.

²⁵ Although Bosola may be trying to trap the Duchess by his praise of Antonio, throughout the action he is clear-eyed as to virtues and vices, no matter whom he serves. Forker (*Skull*, 331–32) and Selzer ("Merit and Degree," 75) too believe we are to take these lines describing Antonio at face value.

Seen against Kyngesmill's idea of a brother-in-law, Ferdinand's proposal of Count Malatesta, whom the Duchess calls a "mere stick of sugar candy" (3.1.42), undercuts his perspicacity as a judge of a brother-in-law.²⁶ Kyngesmill promulgates the value of the inner man, but Ferdinand proposes a husband who is mere show.

Instead of indicting the Duchess, the play anatomizes Ferdinand, and in doing so places his brutal ideology in question. Frank Whigham, for instance, objects to seeing the Duchess "as deservedly punished, chiefly because the ideology that grounds such a judgment—Ferdinand's ideology—is the very ideology the play puts most deeply in question."²⁷ But what is Ferdinand's ideology? From where in the culture of the society and of the play is it coming? Although Mikesell places his attitudes about widows in the Catholic-Protestant debate, the parameters, I believe, are much wider.

II

That early modern England was patriarchal is beyond question: that a widow possessed anomalous freedom and choice in this society is also clear. What unease this situation must have caused can perhaps be seen in the constructs that the society developed. On the one hand, there was the lusty widow, one of the most prevalent stereotypes of the period. On the other, there was the "true widow," the woman who spends the remainder of her days after her husband's death in prayer and good works. In addition, there was the topos of the widow who dies with the husband. What is interesting about these is that none of the three seems to have been particularly mimetic, especially the last one. As I have pointed out, the majority of widows, especially young ones, remarried: moreover, these women as a group seem to have been more circumspect than wives and maids. And, reassuringly for us in this century, I have found no contemporary cases of women killing themselves to be with their dead mates. What makes these three images important to the play is that Ferdinand seems to be able to conceive of his sister only in one or the other—if not eternally chaste, she must be libidinous, and, if so, she must die. He cannot, or will not, envision a life for her outside these choices.

²⁶ "The goodly [handsome] personage without wisdom and vertue, what is it better than a paynted man," asks Thomas Pritchard in *The Schoole of Honest and Vertuous Lyfe* (London, 1579), 70.

²⁷ Whigham, "Sexual and Social Mobility," 183, n. 20.

Although women like the Duchess married, arbiters of opinion in the society from Juan Luis Vives in 1529 to Richard Braithwait in 1631 praise a widow who

requires nothing else, desires nothing else, than to satisfie her husbands bequest, through dead: honouring him with a due Commemoration and admiration of his vertues: for the lives of those that dye, consist in the memory of those that live.²⁸

Even women who do great deeds worthy of a man are extolled for their devotion in mourning. Designating Judith as one of the nine most worthy females for decapitating Holofernes and saving her city, Thomas Heywood valorizes her for remaining in "constant Widow-hood," increasing "more and more in honour."²⁹ Because these women are the best of their sex, they are the ones a man should marry. However, says Niccholes, for "such a Widdow couldst thou marry shee were worthy thy choyce, but such a one shee could not bee, because she would not then marry."³⁰ This is the woman Ferdinand wants the Duchess to be: this is his idea of the heroic widow.

If she is not, then Ferdinand can see his sister only in the other extreme: the stereotypical lusty widow,³¹ the one who "never says nay," as one ballad goes, a message that is repeated in sources as various as sermons where the widow is said to be eager to participate again in "those blessings which attend Wedlock" and physicians' manuals, where she is described as sometimes having "intolerable symptoms of lust."³² Thus, one courted a widow "in a converted order from a maid,"

²⁸ Richard Braithwait, *The English Gentlewoman* (London, 1631), 113. Also see Vives, *Instruction of a Christian Woman* Book 3, sig. Cc3^v.

²⁹ Thomas Heywood, *The Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World: Three Jewes. Three Gentiles. Three Christians* (London, 1640), 42–43. Heywood also praises her for wearing her "sackecloath, and her mourning apparell" and fasting "all the dayes of her Widdow-hood" before she kills Holofernes (30).

³⁰ Alexander Niccholes, *A Discourse, of Marriage and Wiving: and of the Greatest Mystery Therein Contained: How to Choose a Good Wife from a Bad* (London, 1615), sig. E^v. Other sources that deify the perpetual widow are Androtius, *Widdowes Glass*, who devotes most of the volume to praising her (see especially 241, 306) and Thomas Bentley, *The Monument of Matrones* (London, 1582), vol. 3, pt. 2, lamp 5: 178. For those who especially stress the heroic aspect of her chastity, see W[illiam] C[ragge], *The Widows Joy* (London, 1622), 8–9; Braithwait, *English Gentlewoman*, 107, 112; and Androtius, *Widdowes Glass*, 289–90. Advice on how a widow is to fight temptation can be found in Bentley, *Monument* (vol. 3, pt. 2, lamp 5: 179).

³¹ Mikesell makes a similar point: Ferdinand and the Cardinal, she says, "consistently see her as the lusty widow, and in their persecution of her gradually reduce her to the posture of the devout widow" ("Catholic and Protestant," 272).

³² See Samuel Pepys, "Nobody his Counsaile to Chuse a Wife," in *A Pepysian Garland*:

going from "action to love" instead of the opposite.³³ However, few widows seem to have lived out the fantasy of lust attributed to them. In fact, contemporary records show them to be more observant of sexual mores than maids or wives.³⁴

Although Ferdinand tries to paint her as the prurient widow, the Duchess is the object, not the source, of sexual innuendo;³⁵ and her evo-

Black-Letter Broadside Ballads of the Years 1595-1639, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 264; C[raggel], *Widows Joy*, 8; and N. Fontanus, *The Woman Doctor* (London, 1592), as quoted in H. Smith, "Gynecology and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Liberating Women's History*, ed. B. A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 104.

³³ Wye Saltonstall, *Picturae Loquentes, or Pictures Drawn Forth in Characters* (London, 1631), sig. C. Also see Niccholes, *Discourse*, sig. D4^v-E and Martin Parker, "The Wiving Age," in Rollins, *Pepysian*, 238. The widow's lust is not always derided, however; in some works it is given as one of the reasons to wed such a woman. See Pepys, in Rollins, *Pepysian*, 268, and Sir John Davies, "A Contention Between a Wife, a Widowe and a Maide for Precedence at an Offringe," *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 174.

³⁴ For instance, in Stratford-upon-Avon, only one widow was called before the church court, or the bawdy court, as it was also called since it examined cases of immorality, between the years 1590-1616 as compared to twenty-one cases involving married or unmarried women. See E. R. C. Brinkworth, *Shakespeare and the Bawdy Court of Stratford* (London: Phillimore, 1972), 135. In Abingdon, Todd says, the "churchwardens never had occasion to present a widow for living in an unlawful union" ("The Remarrying Widow," 77). Also see Ingram (*Church Courts*, 271-72) for similar statistics. In addition, widows were not often the mothers of illegitimate children (and we must remember that more often in this time period than now widows were young). Keith Wrightson finds "married women or widows . . . only occasionally involved" in bastardy proceedings in Essex between 1627 and 1640 in "The Nadir of English Illegitimacy in the Seventeenth Century," *Bastardy and Its Comparative History: Studies in the History of Illegitimacy and Marital Non-conformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North America, Jamaica and Japan*, ed. Peter Laslett, Larla Oosterveen and Richard M. Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 187. In addition, the Lancashire records from 1590-1606 show only three widows cited for bearing illegitimate children (131, 216, 228) in contrast to two wives (97, 119) and fifty-five unmarried women (see almost every page), as can be seen from the *Lancashire Quarter Sessions Records*, ed. James Tait (Manchester: for the Chetham Society, 1917). Also see David Levine and Keith Wrightson, "The Social Context of Illegitimacy in Early Modern England," in Laslett, Oosterveen, and Smith, *Bastardy*, 163, n. 5; Todd, "The Remarrying Widow," 77; and P. E. H. Hair, "Bridal Pregnancy in Earlier Rural England Further Examined," *Population Studies* 24 (1970): 64. For a contemporary commendation of widows, see *Lawes*, 329-30. In fact, some of the few charges may have been trumped up in order to gain the woman's land, Ingram believes (*Church Courts*, 244-45).

³⁵ "It is exclusively in their imagination that all the trappings of the 'lusty widow' as Ferdinand calls his sister, appear," says Mikesell ("Catholic and Protestant," 271). However, other critics, even sympathetic ones, sometimes see her as "implicated" in "an atmosphere fraught with explicitly offensive sexual innuendo" which "controls our assessment of her character" (Jardine, *Still Harping*, 70) in her first scene with Ferdinand. However, the Duchess' lines in this section consist of the following: "Will you hear me? / I'll never marry"; "This is terrible good counsel"; "I think this speech between you both was studied / It came so roundly off"; and "Fie sir!" (1.1.301-2, 312, 329-30, 337).

cation of the stereotype when she claims Antonio "like a widow" with "half a blush" (1.1.459) tends to dissipate its onus, as it dissociates her from the hypocrisy sometimes linked with this figure.³⁶ In fact, once they are in bed, she tells Antonio,

We'll only lie, and talk together, and plot
T'appease my humorous kindred; and if you please
Like the old tale, in 'Alexander and Lodowick',
Lay a naked sword between us, keep us chaste.
(1.1.498-501)

She believes her union is based on a mutual love, one that should lead to a natural fruitfulness:

Duch. Bless, heaven, this sacred Gordian, which let violence
Never untwine.
Ant. And may our sweet affections, like the spheres,
Be still in motion.
Duch. Quickening, and make
The like soft music.
Ant. That we may imitate the loving palms.³⁷
(1.1.480-85)

If ever there were a couple who expressed lofty sentiments about marriage, Antonio and the Duchess are it. In fact, it is a tribute to Webster's artistry that they do not become icy paragons. We are, I believe, meant to see her and her husband as not only an exemplary couple but a happy one. And it is just this happiness that makes her death tragic.³⁸

Webster places the pressure for the Duchess' remaining single squarely on Ferdinand and Ferdinand alone.³⁹ In fact, several charac-

³⁶ For instance, John Marston's and William Barkstead's *The Insatiate Countess* begins with a tableau of the Countess in deep mourning. Her real feelings erupt later when she wishes her husband sunk "tenne cubites deeper" (6). The play is included in *The Plays of John Marston*, ed. H. Harvey Wood (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1935-39). Hamlet too associates Gertrude with this hypocritical aspect of the figure.

³⁷ It is tempting to see in the use of this word, similar as it is to plum, a comparison of the Duchess' and Antonio's natural fruitfulness and fertility with that of the brothers, who instead of "palms" are "plum-trees, that grow crooked over standing pools" (1.1.49-50).

³⁸ It "is the full recognition of the importance of private life . . . that makes her tragic stature possible," says Rose (*Expense of Spirit*, 163). Along the same lines, Forker says that the play is "a tragedy of erotic devotion in which the lovers, not unlike Romeo and Juliet, risk their lives for values that are shown to be healthier, richer, and more humane than those that they dare to flout" (*Skull*, 297).

³⁹ It may be true the "common rabble" call her a "strumpet" (3.1.25-26), but then they think she is unmarried.

ters even question his actions and counter his charges. The Duchess, for instance, defends herself by telling her brother he is "too strict" and asking,

Why might I not marry?
I have not gone about, in this, to create
Any new world, or custom.
.
.
.
Why should only I,
Of all the other princes of the world.
Be cas'd up, like a holy relic? I have youth,
And a little beauty.

(3.2.109–40)

In addition, even though the Pilgrims wonder that "so great a lady would have match'd herself / Unto so mean a person," they question the justice of Ferdinand's retaliation against her, calling him "too cruel" and attributing the seizure of her dukedom only to "her brother's instigation" (3.4.25–26, 27, 35). By far the most telling reaction to Ferdinand, however, is the Cardinal's, the only other character in the play with a blood relationship to the Duchess. When Ferdinand castigates her, calls her a whore, and declares that he could "kill her now," the Cardinal asks, "Are you stark mad?" and accuses his brother of finding in her an "imperfection" that is really in himself (2.5.63, 66, 51–54). Both Ferdinand's mental state and his transference unfold so as to confirm his brother's suspicions. In one instance, especially, he attributes to the Duchess qualities that are actually his own. After referring to her children as "cubs" (4.1.33) and "young wolves" (4.2.259), Ferdinand succumbs to lycanthropy. When she is reduced to an echo at the end, the Duchess is silenced like so many women in early modern drama, but the power silencing her is shown to be aberrant because of its locus in Ferdinand, whose madness dominates the last act.

Ferdinand perceives the Duchess as the craven, lustful widow, who, like Vittoria de Corombona and others on the Jacobean stage, incurs the wrath of the society by flaunting its mores. However, the Duchess eventually incarnates another construct, one even more extreme than the widow as grieving paragon: the widow as sacrificial hero. From at least *The Defence of Good Women* in 1540⁴⁰ to 1620, after the date of Webster's

⁴⁰ The story of Panthea who kills herself after her husband's death even though she "was in marriage desyred" by his conqueror is paradigmatic of Sir Thomas Elyot's examples of such exemplary women in *The Defence of Good Women* (London, 1540), 21.

play, sources describe a golden age when some brave women followed their husbands in death, a period they say should mitigate the negative opinion of women's present detractors. In 1609, for instance, only a few years before the play, William Heale extols Demotia, who "made a speedy voyage unto death" after her husband.⁴¹ Even the author of the *Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights*, usually supportive of remarriage, believes there is "some colour of reason, to extoll the resolution of *Dido*" in killing herself rather than marrying the tyrant threatening her city.⁴² Even though surely no writer intended his female readers to emulate such figures, in this topos widows were divided, as Vives says, into those who are "nothing moved with the death of their husbandes" and those who "would with a right good will have quitte theyr husbandes lives with their own."⁴³ Accordingly, when the Duchess is shown the bodies of Antonio and her children, she wishes only to die too:

Duch. There is not between heaven and earth one wish
I stay after this: it wastes me more
Than were't my picture, fashion'd out of wax,
Stuck with a magical needle and then buried
In some foul dunghill; and yon's an excellent property
For a tyrant, which I would account mercy.

Bos. What's that?

Duch. If they would bind me to that lifeless trunk,
And let me freeze to death.

Bos. Come, you must live.

Duch. That's the greatest torture souls feel in hell—
In hell: that they must live, and cannot die.
Portia, I'll new-kindle thy coals again,
And revive the rare and almost dead example
Of a loving wife.⁴⁴ (4.1.61–73)

⁴¹ Heale, *Apologie*, 8–9. Also see Vives, *Instruction of a Christian Woman*, Book 3, sig. Bb4^v; Christopher Newstead, *An Apology for Women; Or, Womens Defence* (London, 1620), 24–26; and Jacques du Bosc, "Of Courage, *The Compleat Woman*, trans. N. N. (London, 1639), 15.

⁴² *Lawes*, 326–27. The author is here, of course, referring to the original story of Dido in which she kills herself to prevent remarriage. Virgil added Aeneas and transformed her from "a model of heroic chastity to an example of the dangers of erotic passion," says Stephen Orgel in "Shakespeare and the Cannibals," in *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 60–62.

⁴³ Vives, *Instruction of a Christian Woman*, Book 3, sig. Bb4^v.

⁴⁴ Her behavior differs radically here from the stereotypical lusty widow. In defending her, M. C. Bradbrook points out that had she "been wanton, she would have tried her arts upon her jailers" to escape. "Renaissance Contexts for *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *Mod-*

After the Duke's death, the Duchess craved a shroud only for her blushes (1.1.502), but at this point in the play she would be the absolutely idealized widow, a sacrifice intensified by her youth. Although it is hard for us in this century to envision this form of early modern *suttee* as laudatory,⁴⁵ within the context of the play, through it, the Duchess is approaching the heroic. Even Ferdinand honors her eventually in his own perverted way: "Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young" (4.2.264), he exclaims upon viewing her corpse. It is relevant too that it is Antonio for whom she is willing to die. To grieve perpetually for the Duke was not an option the Duchess considered, at least after she fell in love with Antonio. Here, however, at this point in the play, she would sacrifice her life for her second husband; that her wish originates in her, not in her brother's dictum, valorizes emotion and the private life in the play.⁴⁶

Because of the emotive force behind it and its strong place in the widow lore of the society, her wish to die for Antonio is the climax of her development as a character. Although her most famous line, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.142), has been traditionally interpreted as an affirmation of dignity in the face of degradation,⁴⁷ it is instead deeply, ironically tragic. By identifying herself here with the title granted by

ern *Critical Interpretations: John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi,"* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 54.

⁴⁵ For instance, Mikesell's wording in describing the Duchess in this mode is as follows: "As she kneels to await her death, she has been *reduced* to the Catholic image of the ideal widow who relinquishes" all worldly ties [*italics mine*] ("Catholic and Protestant," 272). My point is that even though Ferdinand has engineered her fate here, the role itself, especially if the woman chose it herself, was deemed heroic in the time.

⁴⁶ Two recent critics have pinpointed the public vs. the private life as one of the central conflicts of the play. For instance, Rose says that "rather than representing public and private life as a hierarchy that subordinates the latter to the former, *The Duchess of Malfi* attempts to draw the two domains together and to confer upon them equal distinction. The point is a crucial one, because in this play . . . the effort constitutes a central, rather than a subordinate action, and its failure provides the primary tragic material of the play" (*Expense of Spirit*, 162). See also Susan Wells, *The Dialectics of Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 62–80.

⁴⁷ For instance, see Ralph Berry, *The Art of John Webster* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 147–48, and Selzer, "Merit and Degree," 77. Robert Ornstein calls the line "an assertion of individuality," but, he concedes, it could be also "justly interpreted as a tremor of meaningless pride" in *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), 148. An important exception is Whigham, who calls attention to the incongruity of her assertion after the loss of her property: "In reiterating her freedom's origin (in rank), she inevitably also reminds us of her deep inscription in that system, for she has no independent proper name. Webster insists she is not Victoria, nor Livia, not Lucrezia or Cordelia, but one born to be trapped in rank, however she may struggle in the destructive element" ("Sexual and Social Mobility," 174).

her first marriage, she establishes herself as the Duke's widow, the role Ferdinand wanted her to play.⁴⁸ (Just for a moment imagine Lear at the end awakening and saying, "I am king" instead of "I am a very foolish, fond old man" [4.7.60].) A verbal echo exacerbates the irony. During the courtship scene at the beginning of the play, the Duchess assures Antonio she is "not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb" (1.1.454–55). However, after Ferdinand imprisons her, Cariola says she looks "like some reverend monument / Whose ruins are even pitied" (4.2.33–34). Dying inscribed in Ferdinand's vision of her as the Duke's widow, she is indeed the figure cut in alabaster, finally the Duke's widow, not Antonio's. The disjunction in the development of her characterization can be seen clearly by imagining for a moment that instead of defining herself in these terms, the Duchess said, "I am Antonio's wife still." With this substitution her characterization would realign itself.⁴⁹ No wonder that immediately after she reminds Bosola of her status, he says the following: "My trade is to flatter the dead, not the living—I am a tomb maker" (4.2.147–48). Although proud in the terms of her society as it defines her high place in the social hierarchy, her statement is tragic within those of her personal life.

In the first part of the paper I joined several recent critics who exonerate the Duchess by placing her in her historical context. My goal at that point was to show that Webster was more careful than has been shown in his creation of her. He uses the nuances of contemporary attitudes and customs about widowhood to make her virtually blameless. Such attention to sociological detail on Webster's part has to do with more than what we used to call character development, however; it also helps delineate what we used to call theme. *The Duchess of Malfi* is about how a blameless woman herself participates not in her physical destruction as much as in her psychological destruction. Unlike Hamlet or Lear, the Duchess loses her hard-won identity as wife and mother. She dies netted in a construct conferred by the society, not one she won but one she was given.⁵⁰ In the movement from climax to

⁴⁸ Interestingly, in *Richard III* Richard calls Queen Elizabeth "My Lady Grey," a term the Arden edition glosses as a "contemptuous use" of the queen's first married name (129).

⁴⁹ "A perception that underlies all of Webster's most compelling drama concerns the disequilibria, both within the psyche and outside it, that threatens a secure or fixed estimation of the self," says Forker (*Skull*, 333).

⁵⁰ In interrogating tragedy as a genre, David Leverenz analyzes *Hamlet* as the "ironic stifling of a hero's identity by structures of rule that no longer have legitimacy," in "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View," in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoana-*

catastrophe to transcendence, a royal scapegoat such as Hamlet identifies with the society and then dies to cleanse it. What Webster does is show in the character of a woman what the hero loses in the process. The hero's original sin—what he, and, in this case, she, must give up or lose in the genre—is the private life.

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lytic Essays, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 125. We could, I believe, say much the same about *The Duchess of Malfi*.